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Life In The Spirit Paul's Answer To The Galatians

by
H. H. (Bo) Simeroth

Long before Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, the prophets wrote of a time to come in which the "Spiritual Presence" of God would bring about a new era, a new way of relating to God and a new form of life in the Spirit. The relationship between God and Israel under the Law had failed when Jeremiah foretold of a new covenant:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (Jer 31:31-34, NRSV).

Ezekiel had seen the failure of Israel and the Law when the Spirit moved him to write:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to follow my statutes and be careful to observe my

ordinances (Ezek 36:26-27).

These prophets were speaking of a new era to come which would be superior to the Law because God would provide his people with the power and the heart to please him. This would be a time when God would bring into being a new creation by the power of his Holy Spirit; a time in which law and religion would be superseded by the superior way of life in the Spirit. For Paul that time had come in Jesus the Christ and there was no going back to the old ways.

Life in the Spirit: The Overall Theological Context

In Acts 17, speaking to the Athenians, Paul introduces them, and us, to a God in whom "we live and move and have our being." Paul taught that there is a sense in which all humankind are "God's offspring." Ironically he makes it clear that these Athenians are estranged from this God whom they ultimately depend upon for their power of life and existence. This is our dilemma as "human" beings. We are, by the very nature of our being, dependent upon and inseparably linked to our Creator and Sustainer, and yet, at the same time, we are estranged. What an awe-full predicament to be in — separated from the "ground" of our being while having a heart-

breaking need for this One. Since our exit from the Garden, so it has been.

The Athenians of Paul's time expressed this dilemma through their many human religious practices which were evident from all the idols in the city. In our time, Karl Barth's remark that humankind has an "incurable God-sickness," well expresses this human tendency toward religious practice as an attempt to solve our most basic problem. Paul sought to take advantage of the religious impulses of the Athenians by declaring to them this estranged "unknown God," not a god of human creation but *the One* who, moment-by-moment, gives to all the power of life and existence, that is, a God who seeks to intimately relate to us as a father to a child. Paul knew the answer to their need which was expressed by their religion. He knew it could not be found in religious practice. His own life had proven that. For Paul the overarching goal of his life, and of all human life, was to overcome this estrangement and experience *reunion with God*. Paul saw only one way that this end goal of life could be reached — through *new creation* in Jesus the Christ. His Galatian letter provides the answer to our human predicament and to reaching the true end goal of life, "For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (6:15).

Reunion with God must overcome a great gulf which, according to Scripture, stands between God and humankind. The many references, both directly and in ritual symbol, to God's holiness and transcendence remind us of this separation. This "apartness" has two categorical components: one is a moral difference; the other is the nature of our being and God.

Morally we are separate and apart from God. God is perfect goodness, and righteous in every way. We are sinful, rebellious and *ungodly*. There is only one who is good and that is God alone. Thus our moral nature and God's moral nature are radically different.

We are also separate and apart from God by the nature of our being. God is spirit (John 4:24); we are flesh. He is infinite; we are finite. He is absolute; we are relative. He is immortal; we are mortal.

How can we, as creatures so finite and small, ever come into union with our infinite Creator? God, himself, has made this possible through the incredible work of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. This is the "good news" which Paul earnestly desired that the Galatians know. Jesus dealt with both aspects of our separation from God. The offering of his sinless life on the cross removed the moral issue between us and God. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the

righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21, NRSV). Jesus' resurrection and the resulting power of his "Spiritual Presence" given to those responding in faith brings about a "new creation" in the image of Christ. In this "new being" the issue of the difference in our nature from that of God's is dealt with. We are being transformed into a new spiritual creation which will be like the risen Christ. Thus, the power of the Holy Spirit creating new being in us overcomes our separation as "human" beings from God and ultimately brings us full reunion with our Creator.

The Law (and all law) focuses on the moral issue between humankind and God. Law cannot provide the power to do the good and the right while avoiding the evil and the wrong. Law cannot change the heart. The prophets spoke of the necessity for something new. Only the new creation in Christ by the Holy Spirit could so empower lives. "The written code kills but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:5, 6). Paul shows very clearly in his letter to the Romans (chapter 7) his realization of the bondage of the old person and the powerless feeling of the flesh. Paul knew that the problem of our weak flesh had to be dealt with first before the moral. He places being prior to doing. His problem with the Galatians is that they were placing religious practice (doing) above or in place of living in the Spirit (being).

Paul had experienced the new creation in Christ of which the prophets spoke; a way of being in which law and religion are superseded by "living in the Spirit." Yet these "foolish Galatians," who had also shared this experience, wanted to revert back to the old inferior way of law and religion. The thrust of Paul's message in the Galatian letter is that the new creation in Christ and the concomitant life in the Spirit are God's ultimate answer to the true needs of each and every person; all other religious attempts to meet these needs are vain and powerless. Only God gives the power by grace through faith in Christ to be freed from guilt, to overcome bondage to this world, to put away the old false ego-self and to live like Jesus — walking by and in the Spirit. No system of law or religion can ever do this.

Life in the Spirit: The Immediate Context of the Galatian Letter

From internal references within the letter, it is apparent that a religious controversy was brewing in the Galatian churches. Paul had brought the Good News to the people there some time before. They had been given the Spirit (3:2-5) but were falling backward into trusting law and religious practice. There is some evidence that more is going on than just a return to Jewish Law. There seems to be a form of religious syncretism going on in Galatia with a com-

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dom of being the children of God, and the old relationship as slaves to the new relationship as children of God. In

binning of Christian, Jewish and Pagan religious practice.¹ Paul not only refers to the Jews being enslaved to the Law but also to the religious pagan being enslaved to the gods of nature — the “weak and beggarly elemental spirits” (4:10) — the states of the earth, sun, moon and stars which they believed had control over their lives. Edward Schillebeeckx in *Christ: the Experience of Jesus as Lord* states, “I think that in Galatians we have a form of syncretism which was to become even more marked in Asia Minor and in which Jewish *peritome* (circumcision, which at that time was also ‘in’ with non-Jews) played a role.”²

Several have noted that Paul, in Galatians 2:16, does not use the article in the Greek text in referring to law. The phrases should read works of law or observing law (not *the* law as the KJV, RSV and NIV have it). Although there are many references in the Galatian letter to Jewish Law, Paul does not seem to be focused totally on the Law of Moses. He wants to include all legalistic systems which try to manipulate the favor of deity by human deeds.

All the way through the Galatian letter, Paul's primary focus is the contrast between the old and the new state of things. In chapter one he contrasts his old religious practice of Judaism, his advancement in learning from “human” teachers and his zeal for “human” tradition, with the new teaching of the Gospel, which was received by revelation from Christ and not from human origin. In chapter two he contrasts the old attempts at justification through human deeds to the new life justified by faith in Christ; he also contrasts the old man whom he has crucified with the new man in whom Christ dwells. In chapter three he recalls the Galatians' old works in the flesh and contrasts that to the new work of the Spirit within them. He contrasts the old imprisonment and bondage under the law to the new freedom in Christ. He also contrasts the old psycho-social order (Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female) to the new order which has no social or class distinctions for all are “one in Christ Jesus.” Chapter four contrasts enslavement to old religions and regimes (human power structures) with the new free-

dom of being the children of God, and the old relationship as slaves to the new relationship as children of God. In chapter five Paul contrasts the old religious practices, both Jewish and Pagan (circumcision and uncircumcision) with the new spiritual practice of “faith working through love,” which is Paul's definition of true religion. He also contrasts the works of the flesh (the old nature) with the fruit of the Spirit, and the putting to death of the old nature with living in and by the Spirit. Finally in chapter six we find the comparison between the goodness of moral action in the Spirit with the wickedness of continuing to please the flesh (the old false self). Throughout these chapters we continually see Paul, both implicitly and explicitly, referring to the clash of two power systems: a system of grace resting on the power of God standing against a system of law dependent on human power. The Galatians are urged to place their faith in the former.

With this in mind, let us recall what I believe to be Paul's final summation argument in the Galatian letter and the thesis for this article — “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” Paul is saying that neither Jewish religious practice nor Pagan (Gentile) religious practice is worth anything. The old powers of Law and the gods which enslaved persons have been thrown down by Christ. They are part of an old era. What counts now is this new being in Christ, walking and living in the Spirit, which is part of a new order, a new reality which transcends all human religious actions. Religion cannot produce the “new being,” only Christ by the power of his “Spiritual Presence” can do that. In Paul Tillich's words, “Christianity is more than a religion; it is the message of a new creation.”³

Paul's key point to the Galatians is in the form of a question — why would they want to go back to the old bondage to human regimes after they have tasted their new life in the Spirit? Paul sees life in the Spirit as the only answer for meeting the needs and anxieties of human life. It is not a movement from law to no-law, but rather, through Jesus the Christ, it is a transformation by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit into a new way of being, the only possible way

of doing what God desires. Life in the Spirit is free from bondage to sin and to law. We are free to serve God wholeheartedly. Life in the Spirit is neither legalism, nor license, nor some middle way in between, it is a *higher* way — a way that is qualitatively different. From the position of reason, this higher way seems the obvious choice for the Galatians. The human ego, however, resists this choice because hard sacrifices are required. I will discuss this later in more detail.

Life in the Spirit: Paul's Answer to All Christians

The concept of living in the Spirit in Paul's Galatian letter (and in his other letters as well) could be described as the invited participation of the "Spiritual Presence" of God and Christ in our lives. Perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of this Spiritual Presence is power — a power greater than ourselves and greater than any earthly power system. Paul saw all the systems of power in the present evil age as having been destroyed by Christ. They were part of the old order and were passing away. This included the Law as a power system which Jesus overcame (Gal 4:3, 9). Paul's emphasis is on a new creation which depends on a new power, the power of the Spirit of God. Living in the Spirit is living by and in this power as a new being. This way of life begins with faith in Christ which subsequently requires the putting away of the old person (the old false ego-self). We are then continuously brought into a closer union with God and Christ. This participative union results in a life which produces the fruit of the Spirit.

Living in the Spirit begins with faith in Christ. Faith takes the place of law as a new and different power system. Schillebeeckx states, "The law came while faith 'is revealed' (Gal 3:23-25). . . faith is a mystery which was hidden in God for centuries and revealed in Christ."⁴ Faith brings freedom and re-union with God; the old regimes of law bring bondage and separation.

Faith in Christ is not just belief. It is a response of the entire person — the mind, the heart (scriptural metaphor for the "Personal Center"), and the body. *Faith is both our grasping onto and our being grasped by the Lord Jesus Christ.* Our baptism metaphorically demonstrates faith overcoming the two previously mentioned aspects of separation between us and God. The symbol of washing in baptism represents our being cleansed from sin which deals with the moral issue between us and God. The symbol of death and resurrection in baptism (Rom 6:3, 4) points to our new creation in Christ which overcomes the difference in being between us and God. Baptism represents the birth point of a new being that is being

transformed into the likeness of the risen Christ. We have often made the mistake of emphasizing in baptism the moral issue of forgiveness while saying little about the relational change of a new creation in the Spirit. Perhaps our focus has been too much on guilt and law and not enough on new being and the power of the Spirit.

Out of our faith and symbolically in our baptism a death must occur. The Spirit does not give life without first leading us through the experience of death. Paul writes in Galatians 5:24, "those who belong to Christ must crucify the flesh." The concept of "the flesh" (Greek — *sarx*), is a metaphor Paul uses to represent our old sinful nature, that selfish ego which we have constructed over the years of living apart from God's Spirit in our lives. It is our own "do-it-yourself" project based on our agenda and not God's. This ego-self shaped by the contemporary social and psychological forces of this world in conjunction with our personal "unfaith," pride, and concupiscence is sometimes referred to as "the false self." It is false because it is based upon the lie that we can live successfully without God, and because it is built upon the great lie: "you shall be as God." Our true self is that which the Creator intended for each of us — a self in harmonious union with God. Jesus is the example of what our true self ought to be. The false self does what it pleases; the true self does what pleases God. As long as the false self dominates our person we cannot live in the power of the Spirit, therefore we must regard the old self as dead.

Paul is often criticized by his opponents for teaching an "easy Gospel." It appears that some of his critics accuse him of opening the door to sin for the Christian, which he flatly denies (Romans 6). On the contrary what Paul is teaching is the most demanding of all — to put to death the old false self. Perhaps this explains the Galatians' odd desire to want to return to the old ways. The moralistic, legalistic approach to the Christian life is actually the easy way. It builds up the false self and allows the personal ego to be inflated with pride and self-deception. It is much easier to follow religious rules, conventions and rituals fastidiously than to crucify "the old man," that false self to which we have become so attached and worked so hard to develop, protect and preserve. The road of religion is easier to travel than the way of the Spirit because it is humanly conceived and constructed and appeals to the human ego. The way of law causes us to focus on ourselves; we must look beyond ourselves to that which is greater.

Crucifying our false self is very difficult. It will kick and scream, and pout and whine like a spoiled child, but its ways must be denied. The only escape from both legalism and license is in putting away the

old false self and embracing the way of the Spirit. In this way there is freedom from bondage to law and religion, freedom from bondage to sin and the desires of the old false self and freedom to be one with God.

Out of our faith in Christ and our rejection of the old false self with its desires, which are in opposition to the Spirit (Gal 5:17), arises the possibility of living in the Spirit. The false self becomes increasingly subdued as we grow in Christ, but it will never be eliminated in this life. There is no alternative but full dependence on God's grace. Living in the Spirit is living in dependence on grace and living by the power of the "Presence of God." Living in the Spirit is letting ourselves be transformed (Rom 12:2)⁵ by Christ into that new being which puts on his nature and shares in his power. What is the evidence of this new being in the Spirit? Paul, like Jesus, points to the fruit produced by such a life. Notice when he refers to the old sin nature in Galatians 5:19 he uses the term *works* of the flesh. In Galatians Paul thinks of works in terms of the actions of the false self. Fruit, on the other hand, is the natural product of our true self in spiritual union with God (5:22).

Notice the first three manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace. These are all special gifts that God places in our hearts by the Spirit. They are not of this world and can never be produced through human wisdom or power. Love is the very nature of God. It is the Spirit which "pours God's love into our hearts" (Rom 5:5). God's love, which we often call *agape* love is the essential trait of God and the quintessential trait/act of humankind. When we act in *agape* we transcend this world and are transported into the realm of Spirit. This love does not originate in "human being" except by the Spirit. It eludes definition. It is the intersection of compassion, charity and good will in which the whole is somehow greater than the sum of the parts. In this love, all religion is transcended, all law is fulfilled, perfect freedom is realized and oneness with God is experienced. In "human being," *agape* is not the love of friendship or romantic love or sentimentality, but rather, a heart burning with compassion, generosity, justice and desire for unity. All love which originates from "human being" is only a shadow of *agape* love which is the substance of all human love. For Paul life in the Spirit is "faith expressing itself through love" (Gal 5:6, NIV). This, for Paul, is pure religion — our faith bearing the fruit of God's *agape* love.

The Spirit inspires joy in us when the grace of Christ has opened our hearts. The spiritual life is a journey into joy — joy in knowing God's lavish love for

us, joy in the company of Jesus, joy in forgetting self, joy in thanksgiving and celebration of life and all creation and joy in suffering and trial. James says, "Count it all joy whenever you face various trials" (James 1:2). Jonathan Edwards, the 18th century Puritan preacher, suggested that the way to identify a true Christian was to look for joy. He saw this as solid evidence that the presence of God was in a person's life. Paul's joy was not an earthly joy. It was a joy that caused him to sing praise to God in the Philippian jail, to write "rejoice in the Lord always" while being held prisoner by Rome, and it caused him to tell the Colossians that he rejoiced in his sufferings (1:24). It is true that when one faithfully endures suffering, the Spirit of God places a joy in your heart that is beyond description.

Peace, as fruit of the Spirit, like love and joy, is not of this world. Nothing in this world can grant us peace from the ever present anxieties of life which are the lot of humankind; only the peace of Christ can do that. The Fourth Gospel affirms, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14:27, NRSV). The peace which results from life in the Spirit is not something we attain but something which is given to us by grace; it goes beyond human knowledge and understanding. Paul describes it as "the peace of God which passes all understanding" (Phil 4:7). Living in the Spirit results in this peace.

The remaining fruit of the Spirit — patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control — are all behaviors which result from the love, joy and peace of God residing in our hearts. We do not train ourselves on how to be patient, kind, good (generous in some translations), gentle, etc. These behaviors are the additional fruit from the Spirit's gifts of love, joy and peace.

Life in the Spirit is not part of the old order. It is new life in the Kingdom of God where love, joy and peace reign. It is a new life begun as faith in Jesus the Christ. It is an ending of the old life of the false self. It is freedom from bondage to law and religion. It is freedom to serve God from the heart. For the one who walks in the "Spiritual Presence," lives by the power of the "Spiritual Presence," and is touched by the "Spiritual Presence" of God and the Lord Jesus Christ the old has passed away, behold, all is made new and life will never be the same again.

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